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Letter dated 23 March 2000 from the Permanent Representative of Eritrea to the United Nations addressed to the President of the Security Council

I have the honour to forward to you the attached press release, entitled "The Melles regime: seeking credit out of duplicity", issued today, 23 March 2000, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Eritrea (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would kindly circulate the text of the present letter and its annex as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Haile **Menkerios**
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Annex

Press release issued on 23 March 2000 by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Eritrea

The Melles regime: seeking credit out of duplicity

It is common knowledge now that the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) has rejected the Technical Arrangements after seven months of delay. Repeated clarifications by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) in response to its endless "queries" since last September; "persuasive diplomacy" by Washington; and/or "adequate time for internal consultations" that OAU and its partners granted the TPLF in the hope of "softening" its intransigence have all been to no avail.

In the rather gloomy words of a senior OAU official, OAU is today proposing proximity talks because it has "run out of steam in its efforts to remove the big stone" put in the way by the Melles regime.

The truth is that OAU finds itself in a bind. The original preference of OAU and its partners after the Algiers Summit in July last year was precisely the convening of these proximity talks. Indeed, the purpose of the first visit of the OAU special envoy, Ahmed Ouyahia (and United States envoy Anthony Lake) to the region in late July was to invite both parties to Algiers for the official signature of the two basic documents (the Framework Agreement and the Modalities of Implementation) on the basis of which "both parties would engage in proximity talks to iron out details of implementation".

Eritrea accepted the proposal since this was consistent with, and provided for, by operative paragraph 9 (a) and (b) of the Framework Agreement. However, Melles offered a lame excuse, pleading to Mr. Ouyahia that Ethiopia wanted to see the details of implementation first so as to overcome a "psychological problem because it did not trust Eritrea". He further asked that these Technical Arrangements be worked out by OAU and its partners for presentation to both sides as "final and non-amendable". "Decide and catch us" were his exact words, and he argued that "Eritrea's real acceptance of the two documents will be tested when confronted with the Technical Arrangements".

These ground rules, which were acceptable to Eritrea, were accordingly embodied in the following OAU public documents:

(a) The preamble to the Technical Arrangements which reads: "Recalling the acceptance by the Parties that any interpretation of the OAU Framework Agreement and the Modalities is the sole responsibility of OAU and its Current Chairman";

(b) The conclusion in the OAU Clarifications which reads: "The OAU salutes the understanding reached by the Personal envoy of the current Chairman with His Excellency the President of the State of Eritrea and His Excellency the Prime Minister of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, respectively, that the document containing the Technical Arrangements is not open to amendment".

In view of these facts, it is evident that OAU and its partners have been compelled today to chew their words owing to the intransigence of the TPLF regime.

Whether this approach is judicious, whether appeasement will advance the search for peace, is another matter, which we will leave aside for the moment. The indelible truth is that the OAU peace process is in jeopardy owing to the TPLF's duplicity and lack of genuine commitment to peace. In the event, the TPLF can hardly claim credit for "accepting proximity talks" today, which has essentially turned the clock back by seven months.

In the same vein, the TPLF seeks to claim the moral high ground by portraying Eritrea as the "aggressor party". Again, the facts establish otherwise. Among other things, the TPLF:

- Used force in July 1997 to occupy sovereign Eritrean territory and to impose an illegal administration;
- Published a map in October 1997 incorporating large areas of sovereign Eritrean territory in violation of international law;

- Provoked the clashes in May 1998 by unleashing an attack against Eritrean units in the Badme area;
- Declared total war against Eritrea on 12 May 1998;
- Launched the first air strike against Eritrea's capital on 5 June 1998 and also violated the United States-brokered moratorium on 6 February 1999 when it launched the second wave of its massive offensives;
- Resorted to ethnic deportation to expel over 70,000 ethnic Eritreans by expropriating their property.

It is these and other solid facts that prompted Eritrea to insist on an independent investigation of the origins of the conflict which has been incorporated as operative paragraph 7 of the Framework Agreement.

The TPLF regime is not guilty only of these crimes. At a time when, by its own account, over 8 million Ethiopians are facing starvation in a national crisis much more severe than the biblical disasters of 1974 and 1984-1985, the callous regime is squandering hundreds of millions of dollars to purchase new weapons in pursuit of its war of aggression. Press reports indicate of a fresh delivery of SU-25 bombers and other weapons.

As Ethiopia is bracing for war amid disastrous famine, Melles and his group are further engaged in a cynical charade that betrays their condescending attitude towards the Ethiopian people. In reality, political power in Ethiopia is today concentrated in the hands of this minority group. Indeed, the central issue of war and peace in Ethiopia is no more within the jurisdiction of the "Federal Parliament" or the "Council of State". This higher task is the sole mandate of the informal War Council, which is composed of the most senior members of the TPLF Politburo although the majority of them do not sit in the "Federal Government". Yet, the TPLF is telling the Ethiopian people and the world at large that "democratic elections" are scheduled for May in the midst of a major war and very grave humanitarian crisis!

All these indicators establish one truth. Proximity talks or other genuine efforts by OAU and its partners will not deliver unless there is a change of heart and a commitment to peace within the TPLF War Council. And as one knowledgeable observer of the region noted recently, the first critical step towards this is for the TPLF to stop this futile act of duplicity; to stop lying to itself, to its own people and to the international community at large.